



DOMESTIC REBELLION: HOW WOMEN WEAPONISE DECEPTION AS FEMINIST RESISTANCE IN *THE SECRET LIVES OF BABA SEGI'S WIVES* BY LOLA SHONEYIN

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Abstract

This paper explores how weaponised deception functions as a calculated form of feminist resistance within the patriarchal household in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Moving beyond traditional critical evaluations that mischaracterise co-wife rivalries as moral failings or domestic malice, the study applies James C. Scott's framework of infrapolitics alongside Obioma Nnaemeka's Nego-feminism to map the subversive operations of the Alao household. It examines how the senior wives utilize systemic paternity fraud, capital siphoning, and performative flattery within micro-spaces like the kitchen to quietly undermine the patriarch's authority and reclaim reproductive autonomy. The analysis further traces how the fourth wife, Bolanle, acts as an accidental catalyst whose demand for modern scientific transparency collapses these protective illusions. Ultimately, the paper argues that Shoneyin validates duplicity as a legitimate postcolonial survivalist methodology, transforming a strict patriarchy into a renegotiated space of shared female authority.

Keywords:

Contemporary African Fiction, Lola Shoneyin, Infrapolitics, Nego-Feminism, Paternity Fraud, Polygamous Matrix.

Introduction

In twenty-first-century African literature, the domestic sphere has evolved into a dynamic theatre of political warfare. Contemporary women writers increasingly reject historical representations of postcolonial female victimhood, choosing instead to map the labyrinthine networks of agency and hidden resistance that operate within traditional spaces. At the vanguard of this literary shift is Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, a text that systematically dismantles the architecture of the patriarchal polygynous household.

A critical gap remains in postcolonial literary scholarship regarding the ethical and strategic function of duplicity. Traditional readings often mischaracterise co-wife rivalries, domestic secrets, and deceptive ploys as symptoms of moral degradation or petty, internalised misogyny.

This myopic perspective overlooks the structural necessity of alternative survival strategies in spaces where open rebellion results in immediate expulsion or physical erasure.

This paper argues that Shoneyin reframes the contemporary African domestic space by depicting deception not as an ethical failing, but as a highly calculated, weaponised form of infrapolitics. Through this mechanism, marginalized wives actively subvert patriarchal lineage, reclaim their reproductive autonomy, and secure socio-economic survival from within the structural blind spots of absolute male dominance. By engaging with Nego-feminism, a framework of negotiation and compromise, the Alao wives demonstrate how domestic subversion functions as an essential, life-preserving methodology.

Historically, critical reception of polygyny in African fiction has oscillated between viewing it as an archaic dungeon of female oppression or romanticising it as a communal sanctuary. Shoneyin complicates both positions by presenting a household that is simultaneously restrictive and deeply fragile, where male dominance relies entirely on a series of carefully engineered female illusions. Current scholarship focuses on how women are reduced to biological utility, yet these readings frequently stall at victimization, failing to account for how women strategically operationalize reproductive expectations.

The Alao wives do not seek to overthrow the patriarchal structure through overt, public confrontation; rather, they choose to hollow it out from within. This specific mode of resistance operates as a secret revolt, turning the domestic arena into a covert laboratory for a feminist manifesto. By examining how the wives use performance to destabilise the home, the text reveals a sophisticated gender reversal where the visible patriarch is gradually reduced to an absolute puppet, while his seemingly submissive wives assume the roles of ultimate directors. The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in James C. Scott's concept of "hidden transcripts," where dominated groups construct subversive discourses safely out of sight of the ruling power. Paradoxically, the sheer scale and fragmentation of the polygynous household provide the perfect cover for underground resistance, blinding the arrogant patriarch to everyday forms of non-compliance. Deception becomes a tactical necessity and a sophisticated form of literacy, proving that the most enduring victories are won through the quiet, calculated maintenance of protective illusions.

Theoretical Framework

The Polygamous Matrix as a Site of Subversive Agency

To understand how deception transitions from a moral aberration to a sophisticated mechanism of feminist liberation, one must first deconstruct the institutional architecture of the polygynous household. In traditional patriarchal systems, the polygynous structure operates as an intentional framework of socio-economic and reproductive subjugation designed to fragment female solidarity by introducing calculated structural scarcity (Amadiume 84). This "Polygamous Matrix" transforms the domestic sphere into an arena where the female body is commodified, and the womb is treated as an economic asset to expand the ruler's lineage and social prestige (Emelone 34). Paradoxically, the larger the scale of this patriarchal consolidation, the more unstable and fragmented its internal surveillance becomes, creating extensive structural blind spots within the household economy (Moolla 76). It is precisely within these unmonitored spaces that the subjugated subjects find the room to build an alternative infrastructure of power (Akpah 136).

Because open confrontation within the strict confines of the Polygamous Matrix is structurally suicidal, marginalized subjects must resort to what James C. Scott defines as “infrapolitics” (Scott 18). This mode of resistance encompasses the circumspect, low-profile, and undeclared strategies used by oppressed groups when open political expression is forbidden (Scott 18). In the context of the patriarchal home, infrapolitics manifests as a hidden transcript, which is a subversive dialogue, value system and operational code created safely offstage and completely hidden from the patriarch’s view (Scott 4). While the public transcript features performative obedience and ritualised subjection, the hidden transcript is where the actual terms of survival and resistance are drafted and executed (Agyo and Jacob 170).

Deception functions as the primary linguistic and operational currency of this hidden transcript, serving as a calculated political act designed to preserve life and autonomy rather than a random act of malice (Oloyede 6). By keeping up a flawless performance of compliance, the subaltern actor satisfies the patriarch’s ego, effectively neutralizing his surveillance mechanism and creating a protective shield (Raji and Adeshote 214). Behind this shield, women can engage in radical acts of non-compliance such as siphoning capital, redirecting inheritances, and managing alternative reproductive choices (Zainab 152). Infrapolitics thus shifts the locus of resistance from the public square to the domestic hearth, proving that the absence of overt rebellion points to a highly sophisticated campaign of domestic sabotage (Nnaemeka 365).

The operation of infrapolitics within contemporary African fiction is best understood through Obioma Nnaemeka’s concept of Nego-feminism or the feminism of negotiation (Nnaemeka 360). Grounded in indigenous African socio-cultural realities, Nego-feminism emphasizes a pragmatic, deeply tactical approach that works through and transforms existing traditional structures rather than staging a direct, external assault on them (Zainab 158). In the context of Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, the characters exploit the patriarch’s absolute certainty in his own biological and economic supremacy to use the very tools of their oppression as instruments of liberation (Nafu et al. 64). The performance of the submissive wife becomes a currency used to buy the domestic freedom required to build independent financial bases and protect their children (Ezekwere 119).

This strategic subversion results in a complete reversal of institutional expectations within the household matrix, systematically transforming tools of oppression into instruments of female liberation. Where traditional culture demands strict lineage continuity to preserve the patriarch’s legacy, the wives execute a radical coup through systemic paternity fraud, successfully claiming complete reproductive autonomy (Emelone 34). Most importantly, the destructive co-wife rivalries that typically sustain a polygynous home are replaced by a strategic co-conspiracy of silence. This shift replaces fragmented competition with a unified, underground sisterhood, ultimately reducing the once-dominant patriarch to a performative figurehead directed entirely by the engineered illusions of his wives (Oloyede 6).

Narrative Synopsis

Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* opens in a wealthy compound in Ibadan, Nigeria, anchored by Ishola Alao (Baba Segi). He is a boisterous, wealthy, illiterate patriarch whose immense social prestige rests entirely on the visible metrics of his masculinity: a massive home, four wives, and seven children. For years, the Alao compound has functioned as a self-regulating micro-state where the three older wives (Iya Segi, Iya Femi, and Iya Tope) maintain

a delicate domestic peace. This equilibrium is built on a shared, monumental secret: Baba Segi is completely sterile, and all seven of his prized heirs were fathered by other men.

To survive the absolute vulnerability of their positions, the older wives maintain Baba Segi's fragile ego through exaggerated public flattery and performative submission. This strategic display satisfies the patriarch's need for absolute control, blinding him to the fact that his wives are actively siphoning his wealth to build independent economic empires and purchase real estate behind his back. By utilizing the natural blind spots of a massive, fragmented polygynous household, the women transform their domestic confinement into a protective sanctuary. Within this space, the appearance of absolute male dominance serves as a shield that hides a radical campaign of female subversion and reproductive autonomy.

This carefully engineered balance is shattered by the introduction of a dangerous new variable: Bolanle, a university-educated woman who voluntarily marries into the compound as Baba Segi's fourth wife. Unlike her co-wives, who entered the polygynous matrix out of pure socio-economic necessity, Bolanle seeks the anonymity of the traditional household as a sanctuary to heal from a deeply buried past trauma, which is a brutal sexual assault and subsequent forced abortion during her university years. Her presence immediately destabilizes the home's balance of power, as her educational status reduces the older wives' share of resources, and her Westernized worldview makes her incompatible with the household's reliance on hidden transcripts and protective duplicity.

Bolanle's refusal to participate in the performance of subjection triggers intense hostility from the senior wives, who launch an underground campaign of domestic sabotage to alienate her. The structural tension reaches a crisis when, after two years of regular sexual intimacy, Bolanle fails to conceive. Operating under the patriarchal assumption that reproductive failure resides entirely within the female anatomy, Baba Segi calls her womb "hostile" and demands a solution. However, instead of consulting the local herbalists and spiritualists whose vague pronouncements the older wives have easily manipulated for years, Bolanle pushes for a scientific medical evaluation at a modern clinic, which is an insistence on transparency that threatens to tear down the house's collective illusions.

The narrative reaches its inevitable climax inside the hospital diagnostic room, where Bolanle's radical honesty acts as the ultimate catalyst for the household's implosion. When questioned by the doctor, Bolanle openly confesses her past abortion, a moment of vulnerability that causes Baba Segi to collapse in performative shock and outrage before subsequent medical tests definitively reveal that he possesses an abnormally low sperm count and is completely incapable of biological fatherhood. The truth exposes the vast network of paternity fraud that has sustained the Alao lineage for nearly two decades, transforming the grand patriarch into an object of profound social irony. The fallout is swift and devastating, leading to internal betrayals, tragedy, and the ultimate flight of Bolanle from the compound. Shoneyin's resolution rejects a simple moral condemnation of the wives' duplicity. While Baba Segi is physically and emotionally broken by the destruction of his masculine myth, the final unmasking forces a radical, permanent adjustment of the domestic power dynamics, leaving the broken patriarch with no choice but to accept a redefined existence as a dependent figurehead permanently managed by the survival strategies of the women who engineered his legacy.

Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative, text-centred research design rooted in postcolonial feminist literary criticism and subaltern studies to examine structural deception in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. The methodology relies on close textual analysis of dialogue, narrative perspectives, and domestic interactions within the primary novel. These narrative elements are cross-examined against secondary academic literature, including critical articles and regional feminist treatises on weaponised secrecy in Sub-Saharan Africa. By integrating James C. Scott's theory of hidden transcripts with Obioma Nnaemeka's concept of Nego-feminism, the textual evidence is filtered through a conceptual framework that re-evaluates marginalized micro-economies and reproductive autonomy within the symbolic architecture of Shoneyin's prose.

Paternity Fraud and the Reclamation of Reproductive Autonomy

Within the socio-cultural architecture of the Alao household, childbearing is not merely a domestic milestone but the primary currency of patriarchal capital and masculine validation. Ishola Alao, known affectionately by his community as Baba Segi, constructs his entire public and private identity upon the absolute conviction of his biological supremacy and sexual potency. For Baba Segi, the expansion of his domestic empire is an explicitly competitive endeavour, a physical manifestation of his masculine prestige. This is made clear when he boastfully addresses his child, asserting, "My Kole must grow big and strong so he can marry many wives and bear many children. Is that not so, Kole?" (Shoneyin 16). This phallogentric obsession commodifies the female body, reducing his wives to mere vessels tasked with preserving his lineage. Whenever this biological assembly line encounters an impediment, the patriarchal framework instinctively shifts the blame onto the female anatomy, completely insulating the patriarch from any vulnerability. This structural gaslighting is vivid when Baba Segi dismisses the reproductive capacity of his wives, confidently proclaiming, "It is her womb that is not working" (Shoneyin 36-37), and later asserting, "I would have had more than ten now if this woman's womb was not hostile to my seed" (Shoneyin 37). By examining these assertions through a feminist lens, it becomes evident that Baba Segi's identity relies on a rigid system where male virility is unquestioned, and female barrenness is weaponized to enforce submission (Emelone 31).

Because an open declaration of Baba Segi's reproductive incapacity would result in the immediate dissolution of the household or the public shaming of the wives, the women execute a radical reproductive coup. By engaging in systemic paternity fraud, Iya Segi, Iya Femi, and Iya Tope turn the patriarch's blind arrogance into their greatest strategic advantage. They satisfy his desperate demand for heirs proclaiming that "offspring make our visit to this world complete! Do you want to remain a barren maggot?" (Shoneyin 42) by securing pregnancies outside the compound and passing the children off as Baba Segi's biological lineage. This deceptive manoeuvre is not a moral failing or a symptom of petty domestic malice (Ezekwere 117); it is a calculated act of infrapolitical warfare (Scott 18). The wives effectively decouple sex from procreation within the patriarchal marriage, reclaiming ownership of their bodies from a system that views their wombs as property (Ayarma et al. 211). Through this hidden rebellion, the wives successfully exploit the structural blind spots of the Polygamous Matrix, transforming their assigned roles as submissive child-bearers into a position of covert authority.

The true power of this reproductive coup lies in the emergence of a hidden transcript that overrides the traditional rivalries inherent to polygynous spaces. While a patriarchal structure relies on co-wife competition to fragment female solidarity (Amadiume 84), the older Alao wives build a silent alliance based on their shared secret. When Baba Segi introduces his son Kole to the family, praising his potential to replicate his father's vast polygynous legacy, the wives do not engage in petty jealousy. Instead, a quiet solidarity occurs when everyone laughs at the child's precociousness, "so no one heard Iya Femi whisper, 'God forbid,' under her breath" (Shoneyin 16). This subtle, shared resistance demonstrates a collective awareness that their survival depends on maintaining the patriarch's grand illusion. By choosing to hide each other's infidelities and protecting the true parentage of the children, the wives transition from isolated agents into a unified front (Agyo and Jacob 173). This alliance demonstrates Nego-feminism in practice, illustrating how women can utilize compromise and strategic deception to establish a protective sanctuary within an oppressive environment (Zainab 148).

The stability of this covert matrix faces a sudden threat with the arrival of Bolanle, whose academic background and commitment to absolute transparency make her entirely incompatible with the household's unwritten rules. When Bolanle fails to conceive, Baba Segi resorts to his usual pattern of public shaming, lamenting, "Your barrenness brings shame upon me. And I am sure that you are saddened by it as well. Every time I have suggested that we consult herbalists and prophets, you have called them con men and rubbished their powers" (Shoneyin 19). Bolanle's refusal to engage with the local spiritualists, whose vague diagnoses the older wives have easily manipulated for years, disrupts the established system. Her insistence on a scientific evaluation at a modern diagnostic clinic threatens to drag the household's hidden transcripts into the light (Nafu et al. 64). The older wives recognize that scientific transparency is an immediate danger to their security; a modern medical test will not merely evaluate Bolanle, but will inevitably expose the foundational lie that keeps the entire Alao empire afloat.

The inevitable collision between protective deception and radical transparency occurs within the clinic, where the patriarch's carefully constructed illusion is dismantled. During the medical consultation, Bolanle openly admits to a past terminated pregnancy, which shatters the patriarchal narrative. When asked about her history, she states that "the pregnancy was terminated," an admission that causes Baba Segi to place "both palms on the top of his head and [begin] to hum at an unsettling pitch" (Shoneyin 37-38). However, this moment of vulnerability quickly shifts from the wife to the patriarch himself. The subsequent laboratory results deliver a definitive blow to his masculine pride, confirming that Bolanle is fully fertile while revealing that Baba Segi possesses an abnormally low sperm count (Shoneyin 38). This clinical discovery exposes the vast network of paternity fraud that has sustained the Alao lineage for nearly twenty years, transforming the grand patriarch into an object of profound situational irony (Akpah 133).

In the wake of this clinical exposure, Shoneyin avoids a simple moral condemnation of the wives' duplicity, choosing instead to emphasize the pragmatic utility of their actions. Although Baba Segi is emotionally shattered by the destruction of his biological myth, the unmasking of the truth does not result in the total ruin of the senior wives. Instead, the exposure forces a permanent, structural shift in the domestic power dynamics (Oloyede 6). The truth does not liberate the patriarchal home; rather, it strips away its protective cover, leaving the broken patriarch with no choice but to accept a redefined existence as a dependent figurehead (Raji and

Adeshote 220). He is forced to rely on the very women who engineered his legacy, proving that their calculated use of deception was not an act of betrayal, but an essential, protective strategy that balanced the power dynamics within the household (Moolla 82).

Performative Submission and Economic Warfare

Within the Alao compound, the older wives survive and gain leverage by establishing an elaborate economy of performative flattery (Raji and Adeshote 214). Rather than signalling genuine submission, their hyperbolic praise serves as an ideological mask. This performance pacifies Baba Segi's ego while effectively neutralizing his domestic surveillance (Scott 4). The senior wife, Iya Segi, masters this linguistic currency during her morning interactions with the patriarch, ensuring her position remains secure through stylized, cyclical expressions of devotion. When Baba Segi offers his routine endearment, exclaiming, "Iya Segi, wife of my youth. Would I have breath if I had not married you?", she responds with practiced precision: "May your breath be long, my lord. Where would I be if not for you?" (Shoneyin 15). This calculated display satisfies the patriarch's need for absolute authority. Yet, the performative nature of this compliance is exposed immediately by "Iya Femi's bogus coughing (which) interrupted them" (Shoneyin 15). This moment highlights the cynical self-interest driving these domestic rituals.

By weaponizing flattery, the wives transform subjection into a highly transactional shield. Under its cover, they safely coordinate their hidden agendas (Zainab 152). Performative submission extends beyond their interactions with the patriarch to encompass the entire household infrastructure. Iya Femi uses identical tactics to manage external logistics and secure physical mobility, manipulating domestic workers through calculated charm. For instance, when coordinating morning schedules, she playfully chides a worker: "Mr. Taju, one would think you had not just prised your body from your wife's embrace. Anyway, it is good that you have come on time" (Shoneyin 28). This mastery of double consciousness allows the wives to project an image of a harmonious polygynous home (Du Bois 3). Meanwhile, they systematically redirect the patriarch's focus away from their clandestine financial and personal operations (Oloyede 6).

With the arrival of Bolanle, the domestic arena transitions from a space of quiet manipulation into a site of active micropolitical sabotage (Agyo and Jacob 175). The senior wives view Bolanle's university education and her refusal to participate in performative submission as a threat to their established survival networks (Nafu et al. 62). Lacking access to formal disciplinary tools, the wives convert domestic spaces specifically the kitchen, the cupboards and the hearth into arenas for gendered resistance (Amadiume 82). This localized warfare is evident when Bolanle attempts to introduce her own domestic style, only to find the kitchen strictly controlled by the senior wives' unwritten codes. Bolanle notes: "When I first arrived in his house, I bought a large orange bowl and presented it to the wives. Iya Femi laughed when she saw it and said their husband only ate off white crockery, that he liked his food to supply colour at meal times" (Shoneyin 43). This defense of "white plates and bland, grey dishes" (Shoneyin 43) is a calculated enforcement of territorial hegemony. By restricting Bolanle's influence over the patriarch's meals, the older wives protect their exclusive roles as providers for his basic needs.

This micro-spatial resistance intensifies into a campaign of psychological warfare and domestic vandalism designed to alienate the educated newcomer. Because Bolanle's literacy represents

a direct challenge to the wives' traditional methods of negotiation, her books and academic materials become primary targets for destruction (Chia and Onyemelukwe 71). Bolanle describes the hostility she faces: "So deep-seated is their disdain for my university degree that they smear my books with palm oil and hide them under the kitchen cupboards. I have often found missing pages from my novels in the dustbin, the words scribbled over with charcoal" (Shoneyin 25). By using kitchen materials like palm oil and charcoal to destroy literature, the senior wives use domestic tools to combat Westernized education. This behaviour demonstrates how marginalized women can use every day domestic settings to push back against perceived threats to their security (Stratton 94).

The ultimate objective of this performative submission and micro-spatial warfare is economic survival. The wives aim to secure long-term independence within an unstable polygynous structure (Moolla 71). In a traditional household, a wife's financial security is tied to the patriarch's favour and her share of his resources (Emelone 34). The arrival of a new spouse directly threatens this financial arrangement by diluting the family's economic assets. Bolanle observes this dynamic, noting that "with my arrival, 2.33 nights with Baba Segi became 1.75. His affections, already thinly divided, now had to be spread among four instead of three" (Shoneyin 24-25). She realizes she "was coming to take away from them" (Shoneyin 25). To counter this loss, Iya Segi and Iya Femi exploit Baba Segi's lack of literacy to run a parallel economy within the compound (Ayarma et al. 213). They systematically overcharge him for household goods, siphon funds from his business, and invest the capital into independent real estate and commercial projects (Zainab 160).

This economic warfare turns the patriarch's absolute authority into an illusion. Baba Segi believes he is the sole master of his estate, yet he functions as the primary source of capital for the women he claims to own (Oloyede 6). When Bolanle offers to teach the co-wives to read, Iya Femi sabotages the initiative by "tearing up sheets from the exercise books to line the kitchen cupboards" (Shoneyin 25). She tells Bolanle that she "could crawl into the cabinets and teach the insects if [she] still wanted them to serve that purpose" (Shoneyin 25). This hostile rejection of literacy is a defensive move to protect the household's economic arrangement (Nafu et al. 64). The older wives recognize that if Baba Segi or the household becomes literate, their financial manipulation will be exposed. By keeping the household dependent on oral communication and performative compliance, the wives preserve their financial autonomy. This dynamic demonstrates Nego-feminism in practice, showing how women can work within traditional constraints to alter the balance of power (Nnaemeka 361).

Bolanle as the Catalyst of Truth

While the senior wives utilize the structural blind spots of the Polygamous Matrix to run their undercover economy, Bolanle's entry into the Alao compound stems from an entirely different postcolonial condition. Her choice to become the fourth wife of an illiterate patriarch initially baffles her Westernised social circle, drawing intense condemnation from her mother who views the decision as an existential downgrade, asserting that a "future will be futile and uninteresting... Polygamy is for gold diggers and bush dwellers, not educated children brought up in a good Christian home" (Shoneyin 21). However, this critique fails to recognize that Bolanle does not enter the marriage for material advancement, but for psychological asylum. Traumatized by a brutal university sexual assault and a forced abortion, she seeks a domestic environment where her intellectual identity and emotional scars can remain unexamined, stating: "At last, I would be able to empty myself of my sorrow. I would be with a man who

accepted me, one who didn't ask questions or find my quietness unsettling... Baba Segi was content when I said nothing" (Shoneyin 21).

By stepping into this traditional structure, Bolanle attempts to erase her painful history, trading her progressive social standing for the protective silence of a traditional household. She uses the domestic matrix as a personal hiding place, explaining that she "came to get away from the feeling of filth that followed me... After everything happened, I tried hard to continue being myself but I slowly disappeared. I became Bolanle, the soiled, damaged woman" (Shoneyin 20). Her motivation directly challenges traditional feminist assumptions that view educated women entering polygynous arrangements as passive victims (Nafu et al. 62). For Bolanle, the household functions as an intentional refuge where she can submerge her fractured identity beneath the predictable routines of traditional marriage (Moolla 71). Paradoxically, her desperate search for a quiet space to heal sets her on a direct collision course with the senior wives, whose entire safety network depends on performative submission rather than genuine silence.

Bolanle's psychological need for quiet honesty makes her entirely incompatible with the senior wives' reliance on deceptive strategies, turning her into an accidental threat to the household's balance of power (Agyo and Jacob 174). Because she refuses to join in the performative flattery used by Iya Segi and Iya Femi, she unwittingly exposes the artificial nature of their obedience. This tension escalates into a crisis when her two-year period of childlessness triggers Baba Segi's deep-seated anxiety regarding his lineage and social prestige. Falling back on traditional patriarchal assumptions, Baba Segi publicly blames her for the reproductive delay, lamenting: "Your barrenness brings shame upon me. And I am sure that you are saddened by it as well. Every time I have suggested that we consult herbalists and prophets, you have called them con men and rubbished their powers" (Shoneyin 19). While the senior wives have spent years manipulating local spiritualists to protect the secret of Baba Segi's infertility, Bolanle's reliance on modern education demands verifiable, scientific transparency (Chia and Onyemelukwe 71).

By insisting on a modern clinical evaluation rather than relying on spiritual compromise, Bolanle introduces a factual accountability that the household's hidden transcripts cannot handle (Scott 18). The senior wives quickly recognize that modern medical diagnostics will not just examine Bolanle's fertility, but will expose the foundational lie keeping the entire Alao family legacy afloat. This clash between traditional deception and modern transparency highlights the limits of duplicity as a permanent survival tool (Nafu et al. 64). Bolanle's pursuit of medical truth acts as a destructive analytical force, breaking through the protective layers of performance that have shielded the household for generations. Her demand for clarity pushes the family toward a public unmasking, proving that while strategic deception can offer temporary protection, it remains highly vulnerable when confronted with modern institutional accountability.

The ultimate unravelling of the Alao household occurs within the hospital, where Bolanle's radical honesty exposes her past and dismantles the patriarch's masculine myth. When asked by the doctor about her reproductive history, Bolanle openly admits her past trauma: "Yes... Once. The pregnancy was terminated" (Shoneyin 37-38). This candid admission shatters Baba Segi's sense of control, causing him to place "both palms on the top of his head and (begin) to hum at an unsettling pitch" (Shoneyin 37-38). However, this moment of exposure quickly turns against the patriarch himself. The laboratory results definitively show that Bolanle is fertile,

while revealing that Baba Segi possesses an abnormally low sperm count (Shoneyin 38). This medical discovery exposes the systemic paternity fraud organized by the senior wives, transforming the grand patriarch from an absolute ruler into an object of profound situational irony (Akpah 133).

In the wake of this revelation, the household undergoes a permanent structural shift rather than total destruction. Although Bolanle chooses to leave the compound, her actions create a new space for agency within the home (Oloyede 6). Despite the hostility she faced from the older wives who went as far as smearing her books with palm oil, her departure changes the terms of their survival (Shoneyin 25). The unmasking of the truth destroys Baba Segi's patriarchal illusions, forcing him to accept a dependent role managed by the very women who engineered his legacy. Even the younger generation begins to adopt elements of Bolanle's intellectual approach, as seen when Akin breaks the co-wives' isolation to bond over literature (Shoneyin 26). Through this resolution, Shoneyin illustrates a complex form of Nego-feminism: the disruption caused by modern truth does not simply invalidate traditional survival strategies; instead, it forces a permanent rearrangement of the domestic space, transforming a strict patriarchy into a negotiated territory of shared female authority (Nnaemeka 361).

Conclusion

The textual architecture of Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* demonstrates that within highly asymmetric structures of oppression, duplicity is transformed from an ethical failing into an essential methodology of liberation. By mapping the operations of the Alao household through the framework of the Polygamous Matrix, this study illustrates how the senior wives successfully weaponize deception to reclaim bodily autonomy, dismantle patriarchal lineage, and secure socio-economic stability. They skilfully decouple sex from procreation through systemic paternity fraud, exploiting the patriarch's absolute certainty in his own virility to protect their children and positions. This infrapolitical warfare is further sustained by a calculated economy of performative flattery and micro-spatial resistance within the kitchen, converting mundane domestic routines into targeted acts of structural sabotage. Rather than destabilizing the home, their protective deceits balance an otherwise unliveable power dynamic, keeping the patriarch pacified while the women engineer alternative realities right under his nose.

The entry of Bolanle into this delicate ecosystem serves as a crucial analytical catalyst, tracing the limits of domestic secrecy when confronted with modern institutional accountability. Traumatized by sexual violence and seeking the anonymity of the traditional household as an asylum, Bolanle's psychological need for quiet honesty directly clashes with the senior wives' defensive duplicity. By pushing for scientific medical diagnostics at a modern clinic rather than accepting the easily manipulated pronouncements of local prophets, Bolanle forces the household's hidden transcripts into the open, inadvertently precipitating the clinical deconstruction of the Alao lineage. Beyond the specific boundaries of the compound, this text forces a radical expansion of what constitutes legitimate resistance in contemporary African literary scholarship. It deepens the critical utility of African feminist epistemology by demonstrating that negotiation, compromise, and pragmatic solidarity frequently require the tactical maintenance of protective illusions. Ultimately, the narrative resolution rejects a simplistic moral condemnation, proving that when the master's house cannot be dismantled

from the outside, it can be successfully hollowed out from within through the masterful deployment of strategic duplicity.

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